BECOMING MORE LIKE CHRIST
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THE FOLLOWING IS A TRANSCRIPT OF AN ADDRESS GIVEN BY JOHN STOTT DELIVERED AT THE KESWICK CONVENTION JULY 17TH 2007 ON 'THE MODEL – BECOMING MORE LIKE CHRIST.'

I remember very vividly, some years ago, that the question which perplexed me as a younger Christian (and some of my friends as well) was this: what is God's purpose for his people? Granted that we have been converted, granted that we have been saved and received new life in Jesus Christ, what comes next? Of course, we knew the famous statement of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: that man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever: we knew that, and we believed it. We also toyed with some briefer statements, like one of only five words – love God, love your neighbour. But somehow neither of these, nor some others that we could mention, seemed wholly satisfactory. So I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of my pilgrimage on earth and it is – God wants his people to become like Christ. Christ-likeness is the will of God for the people of God.

So if that is true, I am proposing the following: first to lay down the biblical basis for the call to Christ-likeness: secondly, to give some New Testament examples of this; thirdly, to draw some practical conclusions. And it all relates to becoming like Christ.

So first is the biblical basis for the call to Christ-likeness. This basis is not a single text: the basis is more substantial than can be encapsulated in a single text. The basis consists rather of three texts which we would do well to hold together in our Christian thinking and living: Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 1 John 3:2. Lets look at these three briefly.

Romans 8:29 reads that God has predestined his people to be conformed to the image of his Son: that is, to become like Jesus. We all know that when Adam fell he lost much – though not all – of the divine image in which he had been created. But God has restored it in Christ. Conformity to the image of God means to become like Jesus: Christ-likeness is the eternal predestinating purpose of God.

My second text is 2 Corinthians 3:18: 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' So it is by the indwelling Spirit himself that we are being changed from glory to glory – it is a magnificent vision. In this second stage of becoming like Christ, you will notice that the perspective has changed from the past to the present, from God's eternal predestination to his present transformation of us by the Holy Spirit. It has changed from God's eternal purpose to make us like Christ, to his historical work by his Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Jesus.

That brings me to my third text: 1 John 3:2. 'Beloved, we are God's children now and it does not yet appear what we shall be but we know that when he appears, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' We don't know in any detail what we shall be in the last day, but we do know that we will be like Christ. There is really no need for us to know any more than this. We are content with the glorious truth that we will be with Christ, like Christ, for ever.

Here are three perspectives – past, present and future. All of them are pointing in the same direction: there is God's eternal purpose, we have been predestined; there is God's historical purpose, we are being changed, transformed by the Holy Spirit; and there is God's final or eschatalogical purpose, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All three, the eternal, the historical and the eschatalogical, combine towards the same end of Christ-likeness. This, I suggest, is the purpose of God for the people of God. That is the biblical basis for becoming like Christ: it is the purpose of God for the people of God.

I want to move on to illustrate this truth with a number of New Testament examples. First, I think it is important for us to make a general statement, as the apostle John does in 1 John 2:6: 'Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.' In other words, if we claim to be a Christian, we must be Christ-like. Here is the first New Testament example: we are to be like Christ in his incarnation.

Some of you may immediately recoil in horror from such an idea. Surely, you will say to me, the incarnation was an altogether unique event and cannot possibly be imitated in any way? My answer to that question is yes and no. Yes, it was unique, in the sense that the Son of God took our humanity to himself in Jesus of Nazareth, once and for all and forever, never to be repeated. That is true. But there is another sense in which the incarnation was not unique: the amazing grace of God in the incarnation of Christ is to be followed by all of us. The incarnation, in that sense, was not unique but universal. We are all called to follow the example of his great humility in coming down from heaven to earth. So Paul could write in Philippians 2:5-8: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God

some thing to be grasped for his own selfish enjoyment, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.' We are to be like Christ in his incarnation in the amazing self-humbling which lies behind the incarnation.

Secondly, we are to be like Christ in his service. We move on now from his incarnation to his life of service; from his birth to his life, from the beginning to the end. Let me invite you to come with me to the upper room where Jesus spent his last evening with his disciples, recorded in John's gospel chapter 13: 'He took off his outer garments, he tied a towel round him, he poured water into a basin and washed his disciples' feet. When he had finished, he resumed his place and said, "If then I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have given you an example' – notice the word – 'that you should do as I have done to you.'

Some Christians take Jesus' command literally and have a foot-washing ceremony in their Lord's Supper once a month or on Maundy Thursday – and they may be right to do it. But I think most of us transpose Jesus' command culturally: that is just as Jesus performed what in his culture was the work of a slave, so we in our cultures must regard no task too menial or degrading to undertake for each other.

Thirdly, we are to be like Christ in his love. I think particularly now of Ephesians 5:2 – 'walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' Notice that the text is in two parts. The first part is walk in love, an injunction that all our behaviour should be characterised by love, but the second part of the verse says that he gave himself for us, which is not a continuous thing but an aorist, a past tense, a clear reference to the cross. Paul is urging us to be like Christ in his death, to love with self-giving Calvary love. Notice what is developing: Paul is urging us to be like the Christ of the incarnation, to be like the Christ of the foot washing and to be like the Christ of the cross. These three events of the life of Christ indicate clearly what Christ-likeness means in practice.

Fourthly, we are to be like Christ in his patient endurance. In this next example we consider not the teaching of Paul but of Peter. Every chapter of the first letter of Peter contains an allusion to our suffering like Christ, for the background to the letter is the beginnings of persecution. In chapter 2 of 1 Peter in particular, Peter urges Christian slaves, if punished unjustly, to bear it and not to repay evil for evil. For, Peter goes on, you and we have been called to this because Christ also suffered, leaving us an example – there is that word again – so that we may follow in his steps. This call to Christ-likeness in suffering unjustly may well become increasingly relevant as persecution increases in many cultures in the world today.

My fifth and last example from the New Testament is that we are to be like Christ in his mission. Having looked at the teaching of Paul and Peter, we come now to the teaching of Jesus recorded by John. In John 20:21, in prayer, Jesus said 'As you, Father, have sent me into the world, so I send them into the world' – that is us. And in his commissioning in John 17 he says 'As the Father sent me into the world, so I send you.' These words are immensely significant. This is not just the Johannine version of the Great Commission but it also an instruction that their mission in the world was to resemble Christ's mission. In what respect? The key words in these texts are 'sent into the world'. As Christ had entered our world, so we are to enter other people's worlds. It was eloquently explained by Archbishop Michael Ramsey some years ago: 'We state and commend the faith only in so far as we go out and put ourselves with loving sympathy inside the doubts of the doubters, the questions of the questioners and the loneliness of those who have lost the way.'

This entering into other people's worlds is exactly what we mean by incarnational evangelism. All authentic mission is incarnational mission. We are to be like Christ in his mission. These are the five main ways in which we are to be Christ-like: in his incarnation, in his service, in his love, in his endurance and in his mission.

Very briefly, I want to give you three practical consequences of Christ-likeness.

Firstly, Christ-likeness and the mystery of suffering. Suffering is a huge subject in itself and there are many ways in which Christians try to understand it. One way stands out: that suffering is part of God's process of making us like Christ. Whether we suffer from a disappointment, a frustration or some other painful tragedy, we need to try to see this in the light of Romans 8:28-29. According to Romans 8:28, God is always working for the good of his people, and according to Romans 8:29, this good purpose is to make us like Christ.

Secondly, Christ-likeness and the challenge of evangelism. Why is it, you must have asked, as I have, that in many situations our evangelistic efforts are often fraught with failure? Several reasons may be given, and I do not want to over-simplify, but one main reason is that we don't look like the Christ we are proclaiming. John Poulton, who has written about this in a perceptive little book entitled *A Today Sort of Evangelism*, wrote this:

> 'The most effective preaching comes from those who embody the things they are saying. They are their message. Christians need to look like what they are talking

> about. It is people who communicate primarily, not words or ideas. Authenticity gets across. deep down in side people, what communicates now is basically personal authenticity.'

That is Christ-likeness. Let me give you another example. There was a Hindu professor in India who once identified one of his students as a Christian and said to him: 'If you Christians lived like Jesus Christ, India would be at your feet tomorrow.' I think India would be at their feet today if we Christians lived like Christ. From the Islamic world, the Reverend Iskandar Jadeed, a former Arab Muslim, has said 'If all Christians were Christians – that is, Christ-like – there would be no more Islam today.'

That brings me to my third point – Christ-likeness and the indwelling of the Spirit. I have spoken much tonight about Christ-likeness but is it attainable? In our own strength it is clearly not attainable but God has given us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us, to change us from within. William Temple, Archbishop in the 1940s, used to illustrate this point from Shakespeare:

> 'It is no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it – I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it – I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like this. And if the Spirit could come into me, then I could live a life like His.'

So I conclude, as a brief summary of what we have tried to say to one another: God's purpose is to make us like Christ. God's way to make us like Christ is to fill us with his Spirit. In other words, it is a Trinitarian conclusion, concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.